

All Right by **theamiableanachronism**

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Summary: She was out there somewhere. He knew it. All he had to do was find her.

1. Chapter 1

He hadn't told anyone where he was going but he bet they would figure it out soon. With that in mind, he pedaled faster, not wanting to waste any time, especially since overhead, the black night sky roiled with the storm clouds that had been gathering all day. As Mike screeched his bike to a halt, the raindrops started to fall. He hopped off his bike and pulled his hood over his head. Pulling his flashlight out of his backpack and turning it on with a click, he stepped off the road and into the woods.

There was thunder pounding in the distance but he couldn't hear it over the heartbeat that was pounding in his ears. This was just like that night. Even the rain that was pouring down so much that in minutes he was soaked to the skin was the same. The only difference now was he was alone. Lucas, Dustin, and even Will had given up months ago. It wasn't like with Will, Dustin and Lucas had told him sadly. "Mike, we actually *saw* her d-"

That was the point where he cut them off. She wasn't.

Dead.

Even thinking the word was painful. She was out there somewhere. He knew it. All he had to do was find her.

He could barely see anything through the sheets of rain and darkness, even with the flashlight. Its light only reached a few feet ahead of him. "Stupid-" he mumbled as he whacked it against his leg, but the light didn't get brighter. All it did was flicker sickly. He should have changed the batteries before he left. Great.

"EL!" he shouted.

As always, there was no response. The knot that never loosened in his stomach tightened. But that never stopped him from trying again and again and again:

"El, where are you?"

"El, are you out there?"

"El!"

"EL!"

Long after his voice had gone hoarse, he stopped calling. He'd been walking for what felt like hours and he was completely soaked. The storm raged on as he continued to walk, his legs aching. The only sound was the rain and the wind. It all felt so empty and cold. *He* felt empty and cold. Not that that was a change. He felt like that most of the time now. It was like there was always this big gaping hole in his chest that just got bigger whenever he thought about her. So it felt like it was getting bigger and deeper every minute of every day. He couldn't stop going over what he could have done differently; could he have stopped it? Could he have saved her?

That was what hurt the most: there wasn't anything he could have done and it just made him feel worse. Made him feel like it had all been inevitable.

Although, if he was honest with himself, everything about his time with El, everything about *her*, had seemed too good to last.

The hole got deeper.

He stopped walking. Trying to ignore the lump in his throat, he swallowed, setting his jaw. He croaked out one last, "El?"

It hung pathetically in the air and then faded away with all the rest. His shoulders slumped. The flashlight was getting weaker by the minute. He decided to head back, not caring much for the idea of trying to get back to the road without any light at all. He was pretty far into the woods; it would take him awhile to get back out. He sighed, gearing himself up for all the questions that he knew were coming, the concerned glances, or worse, the pitying ones, where everyone looked at him like he was going nuts. Maybe he was. Everyone else thought he was chasing a ghost. But he couldn't give up on El. He would try again tomorrow. And the day after. And then every day after that until he found something, *anything*.

He started to turn around, but something caught his eye, something in the flashlight's beam that didn't have the jagged edges of trees and branches and leaves, the only things he'd been finding for the past year.

His heart leaped but he took a deep breath, reminding himself it was probably just some old tarp or something equally as disappointing. But as he got closer to it, it looked less and less like a tarp and more like something. . . human. His heart was pounding now, blood rushing in his ears as he crouched down. Whoever it was was so covered in dirt and grime he couldn't even tell what color their clothes were. He set his flashlight down next to him and reached out a hand. But then he paused, his hand hanging in the air inches away from their shoulder, a horrible thought crossing his mind. Someone collapsed in the woods in the middle of a storm? Alone? What if they were. . .? His stomach curdled but he took a deep steadying breath: he had to know.

Gingerly, he turned the body over.

He let out a strangled yelp.

It was Eleven.

Her face was covered in dirt and mud but he would know it anywhere.

"El!" he gasped. "El, wake up! It's me! It's Mike!" Frantically, he bent an ear down to her chest. There it was: a faint heartbeat. Extremely faint, but it was there.

"El!" he said frantically, now gently shaking her shoulder.

Why wouldn't she wake up?

What if she *couldn't* wake up?

How was he going to get her home? He had to get her home and out of this storm. He could already feel himself shivering and panic started to set in as he wondered how long *she'd* been out here like this.

"Please, El," he tried again, his voice breaking this time. Please wake up, he thought desperately.

But then she moved her head.

"El!" he gasped in relief. "El, are you all right?"

Her eyelids fluttered and she looked up at him, eyes barely open at all from exhaustion.

"Can you move, El? Do you think you can walk?"

She opened her mouth but no sound came out.

"What?" Mike said, leaning an ear down close to her mouth.

"Yes," he finally heard in a raspy whisper that was barely more than a breath.

Relief flooded him. "Oh, good. Here," he said, reaching for her hand. "Let me help you up."

Her small hand latched onto his with a painfully tight grip. Ignoring the pain and holding on tighter, he slipped his other arm under her back to help her sit up. She sagged into him, nearly making him lose his balance.

"Are you sure you can walk, El?"

Slowly, she nodded into his chest, and he noticed she was shivering. No wonder; she was still wearing that pink dress and Chief Hopper's shirt, and both were full of holes. She was still wearing his socks and sneakers, but the socks were showing through the fronts of the shoes; they were falling apart. He dropped his backpack and tore off his coat, draping it around her shoulders. He had the hooded sweatshirt; he'd be fine. She was probably already freezing to death.

He grabbed his flashlight and shouldered his backpack before slowly standing up, taking El with him, all the while saying, "It's all right, I've got you."

Once they were on their feet, El leaning all her body weight on Mike,

he let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulders to help her stay on her feet. Slowly, they set off, heading back the way he had come.

Mike raced home, El sitting behind him on the bike, her arms wrapped around his middle. The way she leaned into him like she couldn't hold herself up scared him and he pedaled all the faster.

They finally came to a gentle stop right outside his basement door. After helping El off the bike, he threw open the door.

"MIKE!"

Both he and El jumped. The basement was full of people, all on their feet: his mom and dad by the couch where they'd probably been sitting, Lucas, Dustin, and Will around the table, and Nancy behind them, a hand clapped over her mouth. They were all staring wide-eyed at the pair dripping and shivering in the doorway.

"Geez," Dustin whispered as Mike's mom raced over to them, followed closely by Nancy. El shrank into him.

"What happened, Mike?" Concern and fear were written all over his mother's face.

"El needs help, I'll tell you in a minute," he said, his teeth chattering.

Nancy gently pushed her mother aside. "Mom. Let me. She knows me." To El, she gave a tender smile. "Hi El. Remember me? Nancy? Mike's sister?" El started nodding before Nancy was even finished. She took Nancy's outstretched hand with what must have been the same iron grip that Mike had felt because worry suddenly clouded her face. But she looked back up at Mike and smiled, trying to put him at ease. "I've got her, okay, Mike?" Then she wrapped her arm around El's quaking shoulders and slowly led her up the basement stairs.

Mike fought the urge to follow them, knowing that Nancy would take care of El, but still feeling the panic of not having her here with him. He'd just gotten her back and didn't want to spend any more time than he had to away from her. He'd had a year's worth of that and it

was enough for a lifetime. Besides, his parents and friends were all still staring at him, waiting for an explanation.

"What's goin' on, Mike?" his dad drawled, a frown replacing his normally bored expression.

"Where have you been?" his mom asked, clutching his shoulders. He looked past her at Dustin, Lucas, and Will and knew from the looks on their faces that they knew exactly where he'd been. They looked excited; El was their friend, too, so they would definitely be glad to have her back, but was that guilt or worry that he also saw in their eyes? He couldn't tell and honestly, it didn't matter. He looked back into his mom's brown eyes, which were wide and scared as they took in her son. "Honey, you're soaked. And look at you, you're so cold you're turning blue! Mike, what were you thinking going out in that storm?" she cried, cupping his cheeks in her hands. He pulled away. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I found El." He smiled, shivering. "She was out there, in the woods." He'd thought that coming in out of the rain that was still thundering down outside would have meant he'd be warmer, but if anything, he felt colder.

But that was only on the outside.

Inside, he felt like he was floating. She was here! She was alive!

His mom looked like she didn't know what to make of him, standing there dripping, saying he'd found his friend in the woods, but he *had* found her, so she sighed and smiled ruefully. "Honey, why don't you go change into some dry clothes?" He nodded and sidled past her. The guys were all smiling at him and they swallowed him into a group hug. Then they let him go upstairs with smiles, grins, and thumbs-ups, which he returned. Just before Mike closed the door he heard his mom's voice suggesting that they might want to come back tomorrow.

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler, but. . ." Lucas started as the door clicked shut.

Upstairs in Nancy's room, El was sitting on her bed, looking around at the pinks and blues and the warm yellow light. She still felt weak,

but a warm shower while Nancy waited close by to help had invigorated her enough that she could sit up on her own.

She didn't know how long she'd wandered through the woods that day or how long she'd laid there in the mud. Honestly, she didn't know how she'd gotten into the woods at all. The last thing she remembered was that moment in the classroom when she'd said goodbye to Mike and Dustin and Lucas, her *friends*, the Demogorgon plastered against the wall by her power, the scream that had come from somewhere deep and hidden inside of her, the throbbing pain that had filled her head as she felt the warm blood streaming out of her nose, and then nothing. She'd woken up in the middle of the woods, dark storm clouds peeking through the tops of the trees. It had been cold, so cold. The pain in her head was gone and she reached up to touch her head. She'd been shocked to find hair, long hair reaching down to her shoulders. It was stringy and dirty when she held it up to get a better look at it.

It must have been a long time since that goodbye.

She was still wearing her dress and the shirt from "Hopper" but they were nothing like how she remembered. They were falling to pieces. She'd gotten up and started walking, not knowing where she was, but wanting to get away from the cold that surrounded her. The cold feeling inside wouldn't go away until she woke up in the rain with Mike looking down at her with worry and fear written all over his face. Worry and fear for *her*.

Now there was warmth all around her. Nancy had given her a pair of her soft "pajamas" and the bed was soft and springy. She felt her eyelids getting heavy as Nancy sat behind her, gently combing her new hair. She'd decided she liked it, especially the way it brushed against her ears.

"There. Is that all right?" Nancy asked once she'd finished, her blue eyes searching El's face. El nodded and smiled. Nancy smiled back, and El thought it looked like her entire face had been lit up. She was still a little shy around Mike's sister, but she was very nice, treating her with the same gentleness that Mike did.

"You can sleep here tonight, if you want, El." She paused. "Are you

hungry at all?"

El shook her head. All she wanted to do was sleep, but there was still something gnawing at her.

"Where's Mike?"

Nancy raised her eyebrows. "Oh. I don't know. He's probably still down in the baseme-"

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Nancy got up from the bed and opened the door just enough so she could see out but not enough for Eleven to see who it was.

Not that she needed to see once the person started talking.

"Is. . . El all right?"

Mike's quiet voice made her heart leap. She blinked in surprise as her face started feeling very very warm and her stomach felt funny, almost like she was going to be sick, but not really sick. She didn't know what to call it but she knew it didn't feel bad.

"She's fine, Mike." El could hear the smile in Nancy's voice as she answered her brother.

Brother.

She remembered Mike talking about that. How he wouldn't be like her brother even though Nancy would be like her sister. And then he'd done something. He'd leaned forward and put his mouth on her mouth. She still didn't know what it was, but she knew that it hadn't felt bad. It had actually felt very nice, she remembered. She didn't know how, but now her face felt even *warmer*, and her neck, and her ears. She even felt like she had to take a deeper breath, so she did. Maybe she *was* sick.

"Oh. Good. Um. . . can – can you tell her – um, can you tell her that I said hi?"

Nancy chuckled. "I'll tell her." She paused. "Or you could."

El barely heard Mike's "Oh, right!" but then he was inside and she finally got to look at him. His face was very red and he was still wet from the rain. He was a little taller now but other than that, he looked the same.

"El!" he smiled, sounding a little out of breath. "How are you?"

She smiled and nodded. "Good."

"Oh great. Me too." He bit his lip, looking extremely nervous. He kept moving his hands, as if he didn't know what to do with them. He finally put them in his pockets and looked down at his feet quickly before looking back up at El.

"Are you feeling any better?"

She nodded again.

"Oh good. That's great. I was really worried about you." His face turned a shade pinker. "Um, I mean, I'm glad you're okay." He cleared his throat and looked away again.

"Thank you, Mike."

Mike looked up and shrugged, grinning. "You're welcome."

Nancy sighed from the doorway. "Mike, El's going to sleep in here tonight."

He jumped as if he'd been shocked. "Oh, right. Sorry. You need to sleep. I'll, um, I'll see you tomorrow, El."

He didn't walk out though, just rocked back and forth on his feet. Then he turned and left, carefully shutting the door behind him. Nancy grinned at Eleven and rolled her eyes, sitting down on the bed next to her. Even though Nancy's eyes were blue, she looked just like Mike when she did it.

Outside the door, Mike squeezed his eyes shut. *Tell her I said hi?* He covered his face with his hands. This was not how he'd imagined talking to El when she came back. He'd acted like a complete idiot in there! What was she thinking of him now? He looked back at the

closed door. He didn't really want to leave. He wanted to stay close by. What if she needed him?

Ha, he thought. El, the superhero, need *him*?

But still. . . oh, it was stupid.

He sighed and shivered, realizing he was still in his wet clothes. He walked across the hallway to change.

Back in Nancy's room, El had crawled under the covers. They were very soft and warm. Nothing like her bed in the lab. It had always been very stiff and she'd never had blankets. Nancy had gotten into her own pajamas and laid down next to her.

"How are you feeling, El?"

El nodded into the pillow.

Nancy chuckled softly. "Good, huh? Are you comfortable?"

El nodded again.

"All right then. Hey, if you need anything, don't worry about waking me up, okay? I'll be right here." El returned Nancy's warm smile, then shut her eyes. Sleep immediately claimed her.

Nancy stayed awake, wanting to keep a close eye on El. She had been so weak Nancy had been afraid of her falling down in the shower. But she hadn't.

El had fallen asleep a few hours ago and seemed to be sleeping peacefully, although at times, her face was clouded by a frown. Nancy knew that she had been through a lot. According to Joyce and Chief Hopper, El had been kidnapped by the government and been a science experiment her whole life. It sounded more like something in a science-fiction movie than real life. It made her blood run cold, the thought of growing up like that, a lab rat. What must that have been like? It was no wonder she was always so quiet. Why would a lab rat be asked to talk?

Nancy shuddered. El was so sweet. She didn't deserve any of that. She

understood why Mike was so protective of her. Who would want to hurt someone like El?

Of course, she knew there was another completely different reason Mike worried so much about El. Standing by the doorway, it had been so hard for her not to laugh, watching him trip all over himself talking to El. It was actually the sweetest thing that he cared about her so much. He'd really missed her. El's reaction hadn't escaped her either; the poor thing had looked scared to death, her cheeks completely pink. It had been an entire year since they'd seen each other. That must have been really hard on both of them. More than once, she'd caught Mike crying in the basement next to the fort where El had slept during that week. He would always try to pretend that he was fine, but no one was fooled. He had been devastated when El disappeared. Nancy had only known El for that one night and she'd *cried* when she found out what happened to her. What must Mike have felt like? They were only twelve years old and they'd gone through so much, she thought, her heart aching. She just hoped they'd be all right.

The house was quiet. The rain was still coming down outside, occasional rumbles of thunder making El stir in her sleep.

Nancy's eyes were burning from exhaustion, but just as she was thinking about closing them for just a few minutes, she heard the hallway floor creak, followed by rustling outside her bedroom door. She sat up in bed, frowning. She got out of bed slowly, trying not to jostle Eleven, and opened the door.

It was Mike spreading out his sleeping bag.

"Mike."

Her whisper might as well have been a shout for his reaction: he jumped up, wide-eyed.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, frowning in confusion.

He looked down, avoiding her eyes. "I just. . ." he whispered. He didn't say anything else, just shifted his feet and tried to cram his hands into his nonexistent pajama pockets.

She studied him for a minute, then sighed. He was so transparent. "Mike, just bring it in here." He looked up with a frown. "What?"

"Your sleeping bag. Bring it in here."

He paused, confused, then let out a quiet "Oh!" of realization. He reached down and dragged it through the door and across her bedroom floor.

"There at the foot of the bed," she whispered, pointing.

On his knees, he straightened it out. Then he looked up at her, sheepish. "Thanks, Nancy."

She bit back a chuckle. He must have been lying awake all this time thinking about El.

"Sure."

She carefully climbed back into bed, watching El to make sure she didn't wake up. She didn't and only rolled over onto her other side, facing the window. Nancy took a deep breath, turned off the lamp, and was asleep within minutes.

Something woke El up. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was and started to panic, her heart pounding. Then it all came back: Mike finding her in the woods, bringing her home, Nancy helping her, Nancy's room. She was in Nancy's nice room. She was warm. She was safe. But she was still very tired and wanted to go back to sleep; it was just that outside, the wind was howling and rain was still rushing down, pattering loudly against the window. El sat up in bed and looked around the dark room. Everything looked a little distorted in the shadows. Nothing looked familiar. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on top of them. She thought about Mike. Where was Mike?

Something made a rustling noise. She looked over to Nancy, but she was asleep and hadn't moved. El's stomach dropped.

Then what had made that noise?

Nancy had said to wake her up if she needed anything. . . El frowned and looked over the side of the bed.

Nothing.

She carefully crawled towards Nancy and craned her neck to look over her sleeping form to the other side.

Nothing.

That only left the foot of the bed. She looked around the room one more time, the objects starting to look more familiar as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Slowly, she crawled to the gold railing and curled her fingers around the cold metal, peering over it to the floor.

Something was lying there. She squinted. It moved, making that same rustling noise.

It was Mike! He'd rolled over in his sleep, and his blanket had made the noise.

But it was Mike! He looked upset, a deep frown on his face. He rolled over again. Then again and again, looking more and more upset each time.

El didn't know what was wrong and it scared her. What was wrong with Mike? She crawled off the bed and walked to the foot of the bed. She crouched down next to Mike, frowning in worry, then laid down next to him on the floor. He rolled onto his back and El scooted away. The blanket was twisted underneath him, exposing his arms. She rested a hand on his arm, watching his face. Slowly, the frown left and his face was peaceful. She sighed in relief and closed her eyes.

Nancy woke up the next morning and rolled over to find El's side of the bed empty. Her heart jumped and her stomach dropped as she sat bolt upright. She wasn't over by the window or the door. She scrambled to the foot of the bed and looked over the edge.

There she was, on the floor next to Mike. They were both fast asleep and facing each other, holding hands. Their hands must have found each other during the night while they slept. She sighed in relief and

felt her heart melt.

They *were* going to be all right.

2. Chapter 2

The awful cold seeped into her bones. Outside, it had been freezing and even though she was inside now, it wasn't any better.

She sat still inside her fort, knees drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped snugly around them. They gave her a little bit of warmth.

Resting her chin on her knees, she looked around Mike's basement. It was exactly the same. Almost like she had never left. The only thing that had changed was her fort. It was up. The last time she'd seen it, it had been in a pile. She had come home with Mike and Dustin that day and frowned, confused. What had happened to it?

But Mike had grabbed her hand and pulled her into the tiny bathroom to clean up before she could ask.

She had forgotten to ask him again. So much happened after that.

He must have fixed it while she was gone, which meant he had been thinking about her. She wished he was here.

A tear coursed down her cheek onto her knee. A strand of hair fell into her face and she pushed it out of the way. She had to have been gone a long time. Her hair had grown, sticking out over the tops of her ears and falling just to the middle of her neck. How long *had* she been gone? Would Mike even remember her anymore?

She watched the basement stairs, but no one came. She hugged her knees tighter to her chest and swallowed around the lump in her throat. She was all alone again. Just like she had been in that black place where everything was darkness and water, the only sounds her breathing and her heartbeat and the sloshing of the water when she wandered endlessly for hours.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to forget. She was in her fort now, waiting for just one sound.

And it didn't come.

And didn't come.

And didn't come.

How long she sat there waiting, she didn't know. She didn't move. Just sat relishing the warmth and comfort of the fort.

But then, there was a click.

A sliding noise and a thump.

Slowly, she lifted her head.

Two sock feet stepped down the stairway.

They were followed by a pair of legs and then a torso and arms.

And finally, Mike Wheeler's face, looking exactly the same as when she'd left.

She watched his mouth drop open and his eyes open wide and then crinkle in a gigantic grin as he ran down the stairs, skidding to a stop on his knees in front of the fort.

He reached out and wrapped his arms tight around her, pulling her as close as possible.

Then she heard the sound:

"El!"

A sob caught in her throat, surprising her, and she felt Mike jump. He pulled away just enough so he could look into her eyes, his own dark brown ones suddenly filled with fear and concern.

"Are you okay?" He looked horrified as tears started coursing down her cheeks.

She pulled him back into the embrace and nodded into his shoulder, smiling through the tears.

"I'm home," she whispered even though she wanted to shout the words.

His shoulders tensed then relaxed as he sighed, burying his head in

her shoulder and tightening the embrace.

She was home.

Mike was here.

And he remembered her.

The tears kept coming and she didn't try to stop them. When she pulled away after several minutes, she saw Mike's own face was wet with tears. He chuckled, embarrassed, and wiped them away with his sleeve. She reached up and grabbed his hand, holding it tight. His face turned pink and he laced his fingers through hers. Her stomach swooped.

"El?"

"Yes?" she smiled, studying his face and memorizing the way his voice sounded when he said her name. She hadn't heard it in so long.

"I'm happy you're home." He squeezed her hand and she never wanted to let go.

Cold air rushed into her lungs as she woke with a jolt. She sat up ramrod straight, her breathing coming fast and painful.

She was sitting in water.

Everything around her was black.

Her heart started pounding.

No.

Where was the fort?

Where was the basement?

Where was Mike?

She turned around and around, looking for something, *anything*, that was solid, that was REAL.

She saw nothing.

Her throat constricted and her mouth went dry.

She had never left this horrible place, never seen Mike, never gone home. It had all been a dream.

But it had felt so real. The dreams always felt real, she realized, as the lump in her throat became too painful to bear.

She held her head in her hands and screamed.

Nancy leaned on the railing at the foot of her bed. Should she wake them up? It had to be freezing down there on the floor. Her heartrate was finally going down now that she'd figured out where El was. She must have woken up in the middle of the night and then found Mike. He was curled up in his sleeping bag at the foot of Nancy's bed. He'd found El in the woods the night before and it had been obvious he didn't want to be far away from El. Nancy had found him trying to unroll his sleeping bag outside her door but how would she have explained that to her mom? Or worse, her dad, when he inevitably tripped over him in the middle of the night? Besides, it wasn't hurting anyone letting him be close by for El. One of the first questions El had asked was where he was. She obviously wanted him nearby too, so Nancy had told him to bring the sleeping bag inside.

Now they were lying next to each other, holding hands in their sleep, which made Nancy's heart absolutely melt. They looked so peaceful. But she couldn't let El get hypothermia. She was just getting off the bed to wake her up when El started to stir and whimper. Mike's eyes snapped open. A look of surprise crossed his face, no doubt because El was lying in front of him and holding his hand instead of lying in Nancy's bed like he remembered, but that look quickly changed to wild concern as he took in the pained expression on her face and the whimpering that was getting louder and louder. She let go of his hand and lifted her arms over her head, curling herself into a tight ball, and Nancy felt her heart twist in her chest. She was obviously having a nightmare, a bad one, from the looks of it. She felt tears start prickling behind her eyes as she crouched down by El's feet, ready to try and wake her up, but Mike had already placed a hand on her shoulder. Still asleep and in the world of her nightmare, El threw

it off.

"El." He propped himself up on one elbow and put his hand right back where it had been, gently shaking her shoulder. It didn't wake her, and the worry on his face increased as he started to shake her more and more urgently, saying her name over and over again.

"El. *El*. El, wake up. El!"

El woke with a jerk, her eyes fluttering open. Nancy watched her body immediately tense and her eyes dart around the room, her breathing coming extremely loud and fast. A lump grew in Nancy's throat and she covered her mouth with her hand.

Mike didn't take his hand off of El's shoulder and spoke gently to her. "El, hey, it's okay. You were just having a nightmare. You're okay."

El's eyes came to rest on Mike and her mouth opened slightly. She studied his face then looked to Nancy standing by her feet.

"Hey El." Nancy quickly put on what she hoped was an encouraging smile. She didn't want to just sit there and watch. "You all right?" she asked carefully, wincing as she took in her scared face.

El's eyes went back to Mike, lingered there for a moment, and then closed, her breathing finally starting to slow down. She swallowed and nodded slowly, answering Nancy's question. Mike looked at Nancy and they both sighed in relief. Nancy raised her eyebrows questioningly at El next to him on the floor. He shrugged, confused. Nancy sighed.

"Hey, El," she whispered. "Why don't you come get back in bed so you can get warmed up? It's freezing down here." El opened her eyes to look at Nancy and hesitated. She looked up at Mike and he gave her a small but worried smile. She nodded at Nancy and let both Nancy and Mike help her to her feet and over to the bed, her tired feet stumbling beneath her. She held Nancy's arm for support with fingers that felt like shards of ice. Gently, Nancy sat her down on the edge of the bed and lifted the covers so she could crawl underneath. El nestled down into the blankets until the only things showing were her bright brown eyes and short brown hair. Nancy couldn't keep

from smiling and reached over to pat the covers where El's arm would be. "You sleep here as long as you need, okay?" El nodded and pushed the covers down below her chin to say "Okay," before pulling them back up over her nose. Nancy looked back at Mike, who still looked really worried about El. She was about to say something comforting to him when there was a knock on the door. All three of them turned their heads to watch Nancy's mom poke her head into the room. Nancy's stomach dropped. What had she been worried about last night? Explaining why Mike was in the hallway? Now he was in her room and she still had to think of an explanation.

"Morning!" her mom said cheerily, smiling at Nancy and El in the bed but then she saw Mike. *There* was the look of surprise and confusion.

"Oh! Mike? What are you doing in here?" Her gaze dropped to the sleeping bag on the floor and she raised an eyebrow, her eyes zooming back up to Mike's face, which was doing a terrible job of not looking guilty. Nancy groaned inwardly. There wasn't anything to be guilty about but her mom could make anyone feel guilty with that one look.

"How is everyone doing?" her mom went on, slowly entering the room. "I made breakfast."

"We're just great, mom! Breakfast sounds amazing!" Nancy seized the opportunity to completely avoid the question in her mom's eyes. She turned to El. "Are you hungry, El?"

The diversion worked and Nancy's mom looked away from Mike, whose shoulders dropped in relief. She smiled lovingly at El. "Is there something you'd like, sweetie?"

El hesitated and looked from Nancy's mom to Nancy to Mike and then back again. She lowered the covers and let out a whisper that neither Nancy nor her mom heard.

"Sorry, what was that?" her mom asked with a small frown.

Mike must have heard it, because he let out a small gasp and cried, "I got it!" He ran between Nancy and his mom, who let out a bewildered "Got what?" as he skidded to a stop in the doorway.

"I'll be right back," he said to El before hopping to run out the door and down the stairs.

Nancy's mom looked to Nancy for an explanation, and Nancy shrugged as she whispered, "He wanted to stay close last night." Her mom's brown eyes softened and she rested her hands on her hips. "I see." She turned to El. "El, you're welcome to come downstairs and have breakfast with us if you want."

"Thank you," El said quietly, her voice muffled by the covers.

"Oh, you're welcome, sweetie." Turning to Nancy, she said, "See you downstairs. I'm going to go wake up Holly," squeezing her arm fondly on her way out of the room. The door shut with a soft click behind her.

That was a close one.

Mike hadn't really thought about how he was going to explain sleeping in Nancy's room to his mom. All he'd been worried about last night had been staying close enough so that if El needed him at all, he'd be there.

And then he'd just slept when she got out of bed to lie down next to him *on the floor*, turning into a human ice cube.

They'd even been holding hands, he remembered with a blush, and he *still* hadn't woken up. He felt like such an idiot.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs, running a hand over his eyes as he remembered how horrible it had felt to watch her lying there, having what looked like a really bad nightmare, and there was nothing he could do. But she was okay now. He hoped.

"Hey, Mike!"

His head snapped up at the sound of Dustin's voice.

He walked into the dining room. Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Mike's dad were sitting around the kitchen table eating breakfast. His dad was sitting as far away from the guys as possible, the morning paper hiding all but the top of his head from view.

"What are you guys doing here?" Mike asked.

"Having breakfast, what's it look like?" Dustin retorted with a grin.

He looked at each of them, still in their everyday clothes, their hair tousled from sleep. His eyebrows shot up. "You guys didn't go home last night?"

Lucas sputtered. "Are you kidding? El's back!"

"Your mom tried to get us to go home last night," Will reported, calmly sipping his orange juice.

Dustin laughed, pouring a liberal amount of syrup over his pancakes. "Yeah, but Lucas read her the Riot Act."

Will rolled his eyes. "No, he didn't! He said, 'Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler, but we'd like to stay if that's all right.'"

"Exactly. Thanks, Will." Lucas narrowed his eyes at Dustin and swiped the syrup bottle out of his hands mid-pour, dribbling a sticky stream across the table from Dustin's plate to his. Dustin slapped him in the arm and stood up to grab a pile of paper napkins from the center of the table. "What the hell, Lucas," he muttered, fruitlessly trying to wipe it off the tablecloth.

"Language," Mike's dad droned from behind the paper. They all ignored him.

"So when do we get to see El?" Will asked excitedly. He'd never officially met her but the boys' stories had been enough to make him look forward to seeing her again just as much as the others.

Mike paused. For some weird reason, he didn't want them to see El yet. He wanted some time with her first. Maybe it was kind of selfish, but he'd barely gotten to talk to her at all last night and what he *had* said had made him look like a complete moron. He wanted another chance without the guys there.

"Um. . ." He walked over to the freezer and opened it, debating what to tell them. "Um, she's –" *Still asleep*, he wanted to say. But that would be a lie. He sighed. "She's resting."

Which she was. That wasn't a lie. She *was* resting. She was just awake while she was doing it.

He pulled out the box of Eggos and put four of them into the toaster.

"Then what are those?" Lucas smirked, looking from the toaster to Mike and leaning smugly back in his chair.

Great.

He glared at Lucas, whose teasing grin was mirrored in the other two's faces. "Look, you can see her after breakfast, okay? She needs to rest." He turned away and took a plate out of the cupboard, setting it on the counter with a ceramic clink.

"Okay, fine," Lucas said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender before lowering them and sharing a sly smile with Dustin and Will.

Will turned around in his chair to face Mike. "Sorry, Mike. It's just that we're glad she's back."

"Yeah. Really." Dustin smiled, his eyes crinkling.

"We all missed her too, you know," Lucas added.

"I know!" Mike said, maybe a little too defensively. "I know," he amended in a gentler tone, looking down at his sock feet.

There was an awkward pause. Then Lucas broke the silence. "Sorry we weren't there with you. Last night." Mike looked up. The smugness was gone, replaced by something that looked awfully like remorse. The same look was on Dustin's and Will's faces, and guilt washed over him, gnawing a pit in his stomach.

"Hey, it's okay," he shrugged. They didn't need to feel bad. Besides. . . He chuckled wryly and looked down again. "You all probably thought I was going nuts this whole time anyway."

"Nah. We didn't," Lucas said quietly after a pause. "We just. . ."

"Should have listened to you," Dustin finished for him. Lucas nodded.

"Yeah. We should have listened to you. We should have been there."

They all smiled sincerely at Mike, who felt awkward being the center of attention, so he just smiled awkwardly. With a ka-chunk, the Eggos popped up out of the toaster.

"Well, El's home now. We need to celebrate!" Dustin held his fork aloft before stabbing it into the stack of syrup-soaked pancakes. Mike stacked the Eggos on the plate as his mom came into the kitchen with a sleepy-eyed Holly in her arms. She smiled fondly and almost looked sad, but then she saw the small tower of Eggos on his plate and raised her eyebrows.

"That's a lot of waffles, Mike."

"They're for El."

"Oh. I see." She sat Holly in her high chair at the corner of the table, that sad smile back on her face.

Mike shrugged and walked out of the kitchen. He paused next to the table and thought for a moment, then picked up the bottle of syrup. "I'll bring it right back," he called over his shoulder as he made his way to the stairs.

"Mike!" His mom called. He cringed, one foot on the bottom step. Slowly he turned to face her, wincing. She looked incredulous.

"Where are you going with the syrup?"

He blinked. "I – uh – I wanted to show El."

She chuckled. "Uh, no. Not in Nancy's bedroom."

"Oh come on, Mom! El can't come downstairs just to try syrup."

"She's resting," Lucas explained.

"I'll be careful," Mike negotiated. "She's never tried it before."

She fixed him with a withering look for a few moments, then sighed in defeat. "Okay. But just this once. And only if Nancy doesn't mind!"

she called out as he ran from the room and up the stairs. She turned back to the table, looking exasperated. Then she saw the pile of sticky napkins between Dustin's and Lucas' plates.

"Who spilled the syrup?" she asked, looking from Dustin to Lucas then Will, who shrugged innocently and drank more of his orange juice.

After her mom left, Nancy changed out of her pajamas into a pair of corduroys and one of her striped sweaters to ward off the chill of the November morning. She sat on the edge of the bed after taking two pairs of socks out of her top dresser drawer. She put a pair on her own feet then turned to El.

"Are your feet cold?"

El nodded vigorously and Nancy chuckled. "Oh, I'm sorry, El! These should help."

She pulled aside the covers and slipped the socks on El's feet. She covered her back up and smiled. "I should have given you some socks last night, I'm so sorry! I should have asked you."

"Don't be sorry," El said quietly but firmly, fixing Nancy with a surprisingly authoritative glare.

"Okay. I won't be." She stood up. "Do those help?" El nodded. "Good! Well, I'm going downstairs for breakfast, okay? Mike should be back in a minute. What was it he was going to get you? I didn't hear what you sa-"

A knock on the door interrupted her. She opened it to find Mike with a plate of Eggo waffles and a bottle of syrup.

"Is that. . . syrup?"

He paused and looked from the bottle to her. "Yeah."

She rested a hand on her hip and raised her eyebrows. "In my *bedroom*? Are youSERIOUS, Mike?"

"Look, I won't spill anything, okay?" he said in a rush. Then he paused and said in a quiet voice, "El's never had it before."

As if she was going to say no to that. "Fine," she sighed, letting him in. He crossed the room in seconds and sat next to El on the bed. She sat up immediately as he came in and accepted the offered plate with a shy smile, still looking at Mike as if she didn't believe he was real. That nightmare must have been really bad to scare her that much: she hadn't looked at him like that last night.

"If you get syrup anywhere, Mike, I swear – " Nancy warned.

"I know!" he groaned, annoyed. "I'll clean it up, okay? But I'm not going to spill anything!" Then he turned to El, who was already eating one of the Eggos plain, and explained in a much gentler voice, holding up the bottle, "It's syrup. It's really sweet and people put it on waffles and stuff for breakfast. It's really good. You want to try it?" Nancy watched El frown and hesitate before finally relenting and nodding.

"I'll put it on one, that way if you hate it, you don't have to have any more, okay?" As Mike carefully poured syrup over one of the waffles, Nancy couldn't help but notice how closely El watched Mike's focused face, almost as if she were trying to memorize it. He didn't notice. Nancy grinned at his cluelessness and turned to leave but she heard Mike cry out. She turned around to see him jumping up from the bed and running to the doorway.

"Hang on, I forgot something," he breathed, trying to push past her.

"What is it?" Nancy asked, bewildered, blocking the doorway with her hands on her hips.

"I forgot a fork, okay?" he said under his breath, embarrassed.

Nancy bit back a laugh and covered it by rolling her eyes. "Don't worry. I'll get it."

"Really?" Mike looked surprised but then shrugged. "Thanks," he said, looking a little confused before turning and walking back to El. Nancy shook her head and went downstairs.

El set the plate in her lap and finished her Eggo. She stared around the room. Her dreams were usually in the basement or the school or

the lab. She'd never had one here, so was this real? Or was it another dream? She'd had so many. So many *nightmares*, all of them making her wake up in a panic, in that blackness. She never knew if she was dreaming or not. When Mike had found her the night before, it had all felt very real: the rain and the thunder, his hand holding hers as he helped her out of the woods, the bike ride home, finally coming home. . . But dreams could trick her, as she found out last night. She shuddered, realizing her throat almost felt raw, as if she really had been screaming.

But it had just been a nightmare. Just a nightmare, Mike had said, his hand a comforting link to reality on her shoulder. She remembered how sad he had looked last night and realized he must have also been having a nightmare. All she had been able to think to do was rest her hand on his arm but it must have helped somehow, because the sadness had left his face. She'd fallen asleep on the floor next to him. *That* had felt real.

Now she was awake, or at least she hoped she was, holding a plate of Eggos with "syrup". The golden-brown liquid glimmered in the sunlight from Nancy's window and she gently tipped the plate back and forth, trying not to spill any as she watched it roll off the Eggo and around the plate.

It all felt very real.

Mike came back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry about that. You need a fork if you put syrup on it," he explained. "Otherwise it's a big mess."

She sniffed and nodded, looking down at the plate.

"El?"

She lifted her eyes. He looked worried again.

"Did you sleep on the floor *all night* last night? It was freezing down there."

"You were having a nightmare."

His eyebrows leapt up in surprise. "Oh. But," he said, looking guilty. "I would have been fine, El. Really. You didn't have to get out of bed. I'm sorry, El."

El suddenly felt angry. She set her jaw and glared at him. "Don't be sorry," she said, raising her eyebrows. He didn't have to be sorry for anything. He opened his mouth to say something, but she covered the top of his hand with her own and he froze. "I wanted to help."

Mike blushed and looked into her eyes. She ignored the heat in her face and waited for his response. He had to understand that all she wanted to do was help. He didn't need to feel bad.

"Understand?"

He studied her face for a moment. "I understand," he said finally, in a quiet voice. Then he turned his hand over and wrapped his fingers around hers. There was that funny feeling in her stomach again. She swallowed and took in a shaky breath.

"But you had a nightmare, too."

She nodded slowly.

"Bad?" he asked.

She looked down at their hands, remembering how they'd been holding them the same exact way in her dream and how it had all been snatched away and she'd woken up back in that place. She held his hand a little tighter, trying to remind herself that it was over. She was awake. This was real.

But there was still a simmering panic in her chest. She shrugged, not meeting his eyes.

She heard him exhale. "Sorry."

She looked up into his worried face and smiled sadly.

"Thank you for waking me up," she said sincerely.

He smiled, his cheeks turning an even deeper pink. "You're welcome."

They stayed that way for a few minutes, not speaking, the Eggos forgotten on the plate. Sometimes Mike's thumb would gently brush the top of her hand and she would smile. It made her feel safe.

Then the mattress creaked as Mike leaned forward and pressed his lips to her cheek. She leaned back in surprise but felt a smile spreading across her face, along with that warmth again. Mike looked silly with embarrassment, especially because right as he pulled away, Nancy came into the room, holding a silver fork.

"Here's your fork," she said, handing it to him with a funny smile on her face. He took it with a mumbled "Thanks." He handed it to El and she took it from him with the hand that wasn't holding his. She didn't want to let go. She tore a piece off the sticky Eggo and lifted it up. The syrup dripped off in a long stream, pooling down on the plate. She stared at it, fascinated, and she heard Mike snicker as she ate it slowly. The sweetness exploded in her mouth, making her eyes open wide, sending Mike into a fit of giggles.

"How is it?" he asked.

"Good!" She took another bite and Nancy chuckled.

"Mike, the guys told me to tell you they finished breakfast. They want to come see El," she added in an undertone.

El watched Mike's shoulders droop slightly and he hesitated, his fingers absently drumming on his knee. She caught his eye and smiled. He bowed his head in defeat and said, "Okay, fine."

As if on cue, all three of the guys trooped through the door.

"EL!" they shouted, running around to her side of the bed and wrapping her in a group hug.

"Guys! Geez, be careful!" El heard Nancy cry from outside the hug. She looked over and watched Mike's sister sigh, grin, and then leave the room, shaking her head.

After they pulled away, Lucas was the first one to speak. "So, did you get your rest, El?" El watched him throw a glance at Mike.

"Yes, thank you."

Dustin grinned and gently nudged her shoulder. "We sure missed you."

There was a round of vehement nodding and she felt suddenly shy, until she noticed Will hanging back from the others.

"Hello, Will," she said with a smile. She remembered him from last year. He looked much better now, no longer cold and shivering in the Upside Down, but there was still something in his eyes: worry? Fear? She couldn't tell, but it faded as he came up to her.

"Hi El," he said, awkwardly returning her smile. "I don't know, should we shake hands or something, since we never really met officially?"

"Good idea," Dustin agreed, grabbing both El's and Will's hands and pressing them together, shaking them up and down, saying in a deep voice, "Will Byers, Eleven. Eleven, Will Byers," which sent them both into giggles.

Will dropped his hand to his side and shrugged shyly. "Um, thanks for helping my mom and everyone last year. It means a lot." Lucas sat down next to El on the bed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"El's a regular superhero," he said, proudly squeezing her shoulders. El grinned and glanced at Mike, who was beaming.

"You know," Dustin mused. "Now that you're home, El, we ought to do something to celebrate."

A chorus of "Yeah!"s met her ears and they all started talking at once.

"You haven't even seen –"

"Yeah, we can show you –"

"You've got to see –"

"OH right, you HAVE to see –"

Mike noticed her confused smile and held up his hands. "Wait, guys, slow down." When they'd stopped talking, he asked El gently, "El, do you want us to show you around today or do you want to rest some

more?" His forehead was wrinkled in concern and she paused. She wanted to spend time with the boys, but she really was tired and her bones ached with exhaustion. They all noticed her hesitation and started talking again.

"We don't have to do it today," Dustin said quickly.

"Yeah, no," Will agreed, nodding vehemently. "We can do it later."

"Or tomorrow," Mike suggested.

She looked at them, her "friends", each of their faces smiling encouragingly at her. A warm glowing feeling filled her chest and she nodded. "Okay," she said. "Tomorrow?"

Lucas patted her shoulder and smiled as he stood up. "Sure. Tomorrow."

"It'll be awesome," Dustin said excitedly, pointing at her. "You are going to LOVE it here, El."

Will smiled. "Yeah, it's really nice. But we'll let you get some sleep." He led the way out of the room, Dustin and Lucas following close behind. Mike picked up El's plate and started to get off the bed but he hesitated.

"You comin', Mike?" Dustin called.

"Yeah, just give me a second!"

A funny look came over all three of their faces and they grinned, as if they were sharing a big secret.

"Okay," Lucas said slowly. He followed Dustin and Will into the hallway. Then, just before he left the room, he called over his shoulder, "See you two lovebirds later."

Mike glared at his retreating back and huffed, annoyed. El frowned.

"Lovebirds'?" El asked, surprised by how red his face was becoming.

Mike shook his head, muttering something about "Lucas" and "stupid".

She couldn't make out the rest. He looked down at his feet.

"Mike?" she asked.

"Sorry," he said, looking up. "I just wanted to say I'm happy you're home."

She grabbed his hand. "Me too."

They smiled at each other for a minute, letting their hands slowly swing back and forth.

Then Mike sighed. "Well, I'll go so you can sleep."

"Okay," she said, suddenly feeling sad. Their hands kept swinging.

"I'll see you later, El."

"See you later, Mike." They took a breath and let go of each other's hands at the same moment. He smiled shyly before leaving the room, saying one last quiet "Bye, El," before closing the door behind him.

"Bye, Mike," she whispered to the empty room. She laid down, pulling the covers up under her chin. Her head hit the pillow and she sighed, relaxing into the soft mattress. A feeling of peace washed over her as she closed her eyes and fell asleep.